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South Korea: Reenacting the Philippine Drama? Summary

The collapse of the Marcos government has captured the attention of South Korean government and opposition leaders and has generated speculation on both sides of the Pacific about whether a political crisis in Seoul could follow the pattern set in Manila. Discussions with analysts who have followed developments in the Philippines provided the basis for our own comparison by identifying the preconditions for the crisis in Manila and delineating key elements to look for in South Korea.

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Apparent parallels abound: South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan is deeply unpopular; in the past year he has returned to the hardline approach of his first year in power to cope with increasingly open challenges to his authority; the political opposition, student activists, and other dissidents

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are trying to mobilize the public behind demands for basic political reforms. Such seeming parallels have put the Chun government on the defensive and emboldened its opponents. [REDACTED]

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We believe there are equally and in some cases more important differences in the Philippine and South Korean situations, however. The government still holds the loyalty of most military officers, who distrust the current opposition leaders. The economy is strong, and few Koreans are anxious to participate in antigovernment activities that could endanger continued development. Christian activists, although influential beyond their numbers, remain a minority within a minority, and most South Korean Christians continue to eschew church involvement in politics. Finally, the North Korean threat has deterred broad-based challenges to government authority. Nonetheless, with political tensions on the rise, events in the coming weeks could provide still missing ingredients of a full-blown political crisis. And if Chun navigates safely through this spring, he still is likely to face a series of further challenges over the next two years, as attention focuses increasingly on his approach to the promised political succession in early 1988. [REDACTED]

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Same Scene, Different Views

Nowhere is attention to South Korean-Philippine parallels more intense than in South Korea itself. The independent media have given unprecedented coverage to President Aquino's rise to power, comparing it in thinly veiled terms with the political situation in South Korea. Several bold editorials have suggested openly that the government has lessons to learn from Marcos's failure to respond to the public's desire for reform. [REDACTED]

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Leaders of the staunchly anti-Chun New Korea Democratic Party are openly euphoric over events in Manila. They contend a "domino effect" will soon bring democracy to South Korea. In their eyes, Marcos fell because he was a dictator who did not enjoy the support of the people or ultimately of the United States. Kim Young Sam, who with Kim Dae Jung represents Chun's most prominent opponents, brushed aside US Embassy officers' analysis of the differences between the two situations, stressing that Chun will fall as Marcos did. In a prerecorded rally address on 23 March, Kim Dae Jung urged his countrymen to make South Korea a "second Philippines." [REDACTED]

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As might be expected, government officials have loudly rejected the notion that parallels exist. In their eyes, Marcos

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fell because he stayed in power too long and bungled management of the economy--a sharp contrast to South Korea's economic success and President Chun's commitment to a peaceful transfer of power in 1988. [redacted]

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Comparing Political and Economic Settings

The Philippines showed a growing potential for political instability months, even years, before the recent crisis began to unfold. Some indicators, such as the country's deepening economic woes, had been apparent since the early 1980s. Other warning signs emerged in the aftermath of the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino in August 1983. [redacted]

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South Korea displays some of the conditions that were apparent in the Philippines by mid-1985, but others are absent or of much lesser magnitude. In particular, we see key differences with regard to military-government relations, the role of domestic and external threats to national security, the political involvement of religious groups, and the economic situation. [redacted]

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Perhaps most important, we believe the South Korean president still holds the loyalty of the large majority of the Army officer corps. (The Air Force and Navy have demonstrated no inclination to become involved in politics). This judgment is based principally on Chun's obvious and pervasive effort to manage the Army's promotion and assignment system [redacted]

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[redacted] Some officers have voiced discontent over Chun's favoritism toward loyalists and their proteges, but we have seen no indication that the South Korean military is becoming divided, as were the Philippine armed forces following General Ver's implication in the Aquino assassination. In South Korea the cronyism issue appears to be chiefly an individual concern over career prospects. [redacted]

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Furthermore, the leading opposition politicians have virtually no personal connections with or support from the military. [redacted]

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[redacted]

In addition, the North Korean threat works to the government's advantage. The Marcos government faced increasing opposition from reform-minded military officers who believed cronyism and corruption had weakened the army's ability to check the growing Communist insurgency; the Chun government faces no such challenge. Rather, the widely shared conviction that North Korea is poised to exploit opportunities to reunify Korea reinforces the military's sense of professionalism and self-image as the nation's guardian, inhibiting internal political maneuvering. These same factors may also work to Chun's disadvantage, however, if senior officers became convinced that his political problems were eroding military discipline or undermining the all-important US-South Korean security relationship. [redacted]

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The palpable North Korean threat also deters the majority of South Koreans from supporting more radical anti-Chun actions. Even the widespread perception that Chun, like his predecessors, has used the danger of North Korean aggression to justify repressive political controls has not made the public less wary of P'yongyang's intentions. [redacted]

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Both government policy and Korea's Confucian political heritage have inhibited religious communities, including the approximately 25 percent of the population that is Christian, from seeking a collective political role. To be sure, endorsement of the opposition's signature drive by dissident church groups, and particularly Cardinal Kim--the moderate Catholic prelate for one-fifth of South Korea's Christians--adds greater moral force to demands for constitutional reform. Cardinal Kim has pursued a lower key course than Philippine Cardinal Sin, however, and a strong conservative element, particularly within the mainline Protestant denominations, hampers the vocal activist minority in expanding church involvement in politics. [redacted]

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Nor do South Korea's economic worries resemble the Philippines's massive problems. Three decades of remarkable development have made South Korea arguably the strongest of the newly industrializing countries, instilling most South Koreans with confidence in the future and a jaundiced view of actions by either the opposition or the government that would endanger continued growth.

- Unlike Marcos, Chun has given skilled technocrats considerable authority over economic policy. A recasting of the key economic posts in mid-January made

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an already strong team better. The economy's fundamental strengths also give the government room to deal with economic fluctuations without the need for drastic reforms. [redacted]

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We anticipate that, for at least the next few months, plunging oil prices, moderating interest rates, and favorable exchange rate trends will ease stresses arising from last year's lackluster economic performance. Stronger economic performance should make several contentious issues less volatile, including:

- The perception that the captains of South Korea's large conglomerates command an unfair share of the benefits of growth.
- Worker discontent over tough controls on unions and collective bargaining.
- The difficulty of meeting the high occupational goals of the growing number of university graduates. [redacted]

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Chun: Not Teetering on the Brink

Analysts who followed the Philippine crisis agree that the assassination of Benigno Aquino fuzed an already unstable political situation. In particular, the assassination and subsequent coverup:

- Blemished indelibly Marcos's leadership and legitimacy.
- Created deep fissures in the government's political base.
- Gave Marcos's opponents a dramatic and potent symbol.
- Galvanized important segments of mainstream Philippine society into active opposition to Marcos.

We do see some parallels between the key elements of this second stage of the Philippine crisis and possible future developments in South Korea. [redacted]

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Chun's legitimacy, like that of Marcos, is under a cloud.
Most South Koreans see Chun as a military usurper who exploited the confusion following President Park Chong Hee's assassination in 1979.

- The bloody suppression in 1980 of civil disturbances in Kwangju City by army troops, as Chun moved to consolidate his power, continues to shadow the president.

- Few Koreans accept the government-orchestrated presidential election in 1981 as a genuine popular endorsement of Chun's leadership. []

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The government's civilian political base is brittle. Chun has been careful to prevent any of his political allies from developing support bases of their own, with the result that:

- The ruling Democratic Justice Party, which claims a million-plus members, has little independence or "stand alone" capability; its roots are only as deep as the party's political slush funds.
- Chun has few fans among businessmen, whose pro forma support is chiefly a matter of self-protection; the business community is even less attracted to Chun's opponents, who are mistrusted and judged to have little appreciation for or skill in economic matters.
- The urban middle and working classes have been alienated by the government's zealous suppression of student dissent, the repression and blackballing of activist workers, and Chun's failure to address popular desires for democratization. The First Family's imperious public manner and the widespread stories of nepotism and corruption involving presidential relatives make them the target of extensive private vituperation.
- Even politically conservative farmers, now less than 25 percent of South Korea's population, show little positive enthusiasm for Chun. The phasing out of costly farm price support programs has undermined their traditional passivity and reflexive support for the government. []

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Nonetheless, several key ingredients of a full-blown political crisis are still missing in South Korea. In particular, Chun's opponents do not yet have a dramatic symbol that commands widespread, active support.

- Leaders of the New Korea Democratic Party hope their petition campaign for direct presidential elections will provide such a focus, but the public's cynicism toward most opposition politicians and a reluctance to get involved have thus far helped check the momentum. []

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Equally important, no single leader has been able to rise above factional rivalries and unify the diverse opposition and dissident elements.

- Kim Dae Jung sees himself in this role, but his unvarnished presidential ambition and reputation for intrigue have alienated some former supporters and hurt his charismatic appeal among students and the middle class. [REDACTED]

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Finally, the South Korean opposition faces several roadblocks in any effort to galvanize the population into a broadly-based, anti-Chun movement.

- The internal security apparatus, including a pervasive network of informers and more than 40,000 specially trained riot police, has effectively prevented dissident groups from coordinating their activities.
- Chun, more than Marcos, has been willing to use the government's sweeping administrative and legal powers to control political opponents and suppress public protests.
- A virtual government monopoly on the broadcast media, tough press laws, and manipulation of the media's political coverage have prevented a freewheeling opposition press from emerging, even though the more independent newspapers regularly test the limits of the government's tolerance. [REDACTED]

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Beyond Parallels

Although parallels can be drawn between South Korea and the Philippines, recent political developments in South Korea, by themselves, are grounds for concern given South Korea's own historical precedents for dramatic political change. Indeed, the circumstances--economic stagnation, corruption, an enfeebled leader, and crony politics--and events--including blatant election fraud and withdrawal of US backing--surrounding the collapse of the Marcos regime have an earlier Korean precedent in the fall of President Syngman Rhee in 1960, an event South Korean students typically commemorate on 19 April with noisy antigovernment demonstrations. [REDACTED]

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At this point, however, we are less worried by current parallels between South Korea and the Philippines than by the real possibility that the perception of similarities could set the stage for a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Chun government is increasingly concerned that US support may be fraying.

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Meanwhile, Chun's opponents know they have caught US attention and are attempting to make the most of what they see as greater domestic pressure on Washington to distance itself from authoritarian allies--a perception that openly sympathetic statements by official and unofficial Americans will reinforce.

- Leaders of the opposition New Korea Democratic Party, convinced Chun is vulnerable to US pressure, are now demanding an accelerated timetable for political liberalization that would allow for constitutional amendment this year and direct presidential elections in 1987.
- New Korea Democratic Party leaders have announced the formation of an alliance with several dissident organizations, including the activist Korean National Council of Churches, to step up the democratization movement. Opposition leaders are expanding the petition drive to the provinces and are now quietly encouraging student participation. [REDACTED]

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Difficult Weeks Ahead

With the added complication of the Philippine precedent, Chun faces a turbulent spring. He confronts an opposition that now believes it has a window of opportunity to extract major concessions. Several important events and anniversaries during the next several weeks may well prompt the opposition to press its challenge:

- 21 March to 9 April...National Assembly in session...debate over the agenda and authority of the constitution deliberation committee will probably ensnarl the session.
- 2 to 4 April...scheduled visit to Seoul by US Secretary of Defense...possible occasion for demonstrations demanding US support for democratization.
- 6 April...opposition rally supporting signature campaign planned for Taegu.
- 5 to 21 April...Chun scheduled to visit Europe.
- 19 April...anniversary of the 1960 Student Revolution that led to the ouster of President Syngman Rhee.
- 21 to 26 April...Association of National Olympic Committees scheduled to meet in Seoul.
- 2 to 4 May...Prime Minister Thatcher scheduled to visit Seoul.

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- 12 to 15 May...Canadian Prime Minister Mulroney to visit Seoul.
- 17 to 27 May...anniversary of Chun's takeover and the Kwangju rebellion in 1980.
- 27, 30 May...anniversaries of protest suicides in 1980 and 1981 by two university students. []

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Ironically, Chun's own agenda to enhance his international credentials and domestic standing--his European trip and the parade of foreign visitors set this year--also adds to his political vulnerability. With the Asian Games and an historic visit by the Japanese Crown Prince only six months away, and the Seoul Olympics on the horizon for 1988, Chun would appear to have an incentive to mollify his critics in the interest of maintaining a stable domestic scene and projecting a sense of national unity. And the government has in fact allowed the opposition to hold rallies in support of the petition campaign both in Seoul and in key provincial cities. Both the opposition organizers and the police have been careful to ensure that the rallies have come off peacefully. []

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Nonetheless, we have seen the President surround himself in the past year with a cadre of personal advisers who are known to give hardline advice. It is altogether likely that the government could crack down once more--particularly after Chun's European trip is safely behind him--if the opposition challenge continues to grow. We are frankly concerned that such harsh tactics will provoke stronger opposition defiance--as historically has been the case in Korea--particularly since Chun's antagonists believe they have him at a disadvantage.

- If Chun then made concessions--especially if they appeared to be a result of US prodding--the opposition would read this as a sign of vulnerability and be tempted to press its attack even harder. []

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In our judgment, such a cycle of escalating confrontation and repression could provide the missing ingredient that would turn the present tensions into a full-blown political crisis.

- The use of excessive force against student demonstrators or the opposition's signature campaign could give Chun's challengers the symbol they need to galvanize active popular support. A similarly heavy-handed effort to block opposition efforts by, for example, placing Kim Dae Jung under indefinite house arrest or reimprisoning him, could again give Kim the mantle of martyrdom and perhaps make him undisputed leader of the opposition camp.

- Declaration of martial law, particularly against a backdrop of broadly based protests and public demarches from Washington, could also precipitate a larger crisis. [REDACTED]

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In the past, Chun has shown the ability to sidestep danger at the last moment, but we believe there is significant risk of a major clash as the spring political season moves toward the anniversary of the Kwangju uprising in late May. If the political situation does unravel, Chun might feel compelled to call in the military to reestablish order.

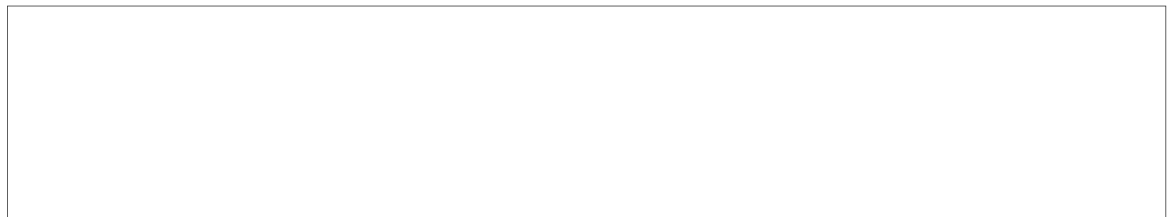
- We believe Army loyalty would not extend to protecting Chun against a civil disobedience campaign as happened in the final stages of the Philippines crisis.
- Although the tough Special Warfare Forces would probably obey orders to fire on civilians, the Philippine drama-- as well as memories of the Kwangju rebellion-- undoubtedly have made the generals sensitive to the high political costs of such a step. [REDACTED]

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And More Problems Down The Road

The next few months are only the beginning of a series of difficult challenges facing Chun over the next two years. The potential for political turmoil will remain high in South Korea, in our view, as the spotlight remains on Chun's approach to democratization through 1988.

- Chun's refusal to set an acceptable schedule for political relaxation, including constitutional reform, or to clarify his plans for a transfer of power in 1988--when he has promised to step down as the constitution requires--are the key issues. His behavior has fueled speculation among politically attuned Koreans that he plans either to install a compliant surrogate, enabling him to manipulate the government from behind the scenes, or to seek another term under a new constitution.



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We expect the example of the Philippines to contribute to the siege mentality many observers say has become increasingly apparent among Chun and his inner circle. The result could

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further diminish Chun's ability to cope constructively with the succession question.

- Should the Army leadership and senior ruling party officials anticipate an election crisis, each will probably press for a greater role in selecting the government's presidential candidate--thereby creating disunity within the ruling camp. [REDACTED]

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If the military ultimately feels compelled to step in to quiet political discord, we believe its first move would be Chun's removal. But we would also expect it would muzzle the more intransigent opposition leaders, probably using the same rationale--"political renovation"--applied by earlier military governments. We regard the military as the single most important arbiter of political power in South Korea in a crisis. But, even if it successfully manages a leadership transition on its own terms, the military will have to come to grips with:

- Rising aspirations for a more open political system, which will make South Korea's predominantly urban population increasingly intolerant of any attempt by military leaders to postpone political reforms.
- The growing desire among postwar generation Koreans for some sort of modus vivendi with North Korea, and their increasing suspicion that the pursuit of military superiority in both Seoul and P'yongyang represents a rationale to hold power. [REDACTED]

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